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ABSTRACT

Two graduate students teaching a required first-year composition course at the University of Arizona designed a classroom environment in which they could explore with students the invisible rules governing black and white people's notions of what constitutes "appropriate" communication. In many ways, their efforts at this large, public university with a predominantly white, affluent student population were disappointing. Though most of the students left the course better writers, few would be able to map out the differences in black and white communicative styles or to explain how those differences result in communicative conflicts. For the most part, the instructors were not able to focus the course on the topic of style very often. Recommendations based on the instructors' experience with this course are: (1) use genres accessible to the student population; (2) adapt the instructional approach according to the roles the instructor can play and that the students can assume; (3) with students, develop vocabulary that delineates different aspects of issues of race; (4) reverse the fore- and background discussions of racism; (5) capitalize on "communicative trouble" as a means of exposing implicit rules governing appropriate communication; and (6) create writing assignments that require students to situate themselves and their reading/writing processes in a context. Based on students' responses to end-of-semester evaluations, the course helped make students aware of the contextually bound nature of "appropriate style" and of communication effectiveness. (A detailed description of the goals for the course is attached.) (RS)

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Into Action:
Reading Black and White Styles in the Composition Classroom

Tahirah and Michael [the first two presenters of our session] have both talked about ways that teachers and peers alike evaluated their styles and about how those evaluations affected their performance and self-image. Michael also presented some theoretical ways that teachers of English might think of style in order to re-define this term. The purpose of my section of our presentation is to offer practical ideas about how to incorporate into the composition classroom some of the things Michael and Tahirah have been talking about. In specific, I'm going to share the challenges and successes that Michael and I had when we taught a course that highlighted black and white communicative styles; I'll also make some recommendations based on what we learned from our experiences.

First some background: Michael's and my goal in designing the course was to create a classroom environment in which we could explore with students the invisible rules governing black and white people's notions of what constitutes "appropriate" communication. Our inspiration for the course was Thomas Kochman's Black and White Styles in Conflict, a book which describes Kochman's years of experience in teaching graduate level courses in black language at Chicago's Center for Inner City Studies and in serving as a consultant for other educational and civic institutions striving to understand the conventions of black culture. We were steeped in our own experiences with the friction and misreading often involved in black and white interactions; my experience with Tahirah and the "Stop talking!" incident were fresh in my mind. We were also well aware of the pedagogical effectiveness of problematizing what seems

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"natural," in this case the dominant culture's invisible rules for communicative interaction. So, we decided we wanted to do our best to emulate Kochman's course goals and subject matter. (The handout that I've given you [Attachment #1] outlines in detail what were our goals for the course and what were our composition program's goal for the first-year course we modified for our purposes. It also gives you a better idea of our specific curriculum.)

From the outset we knew we'd have some problems. In retrospect I see that these problems remind me of those I encountered once when I wrote a seminar paper in the personal, narratively structured style I had been absorbing in a semester of independent study reading bell hooks and Alice Walker and teaching Richard Rodriguez and Mike Rose. When my advisor objected to the loose, non-linear arrangement of my piece, I explained to him that I was practicing writing like bell hooks, trying to find a new style. "But you're not her," he said and insisted that I needed to restructure my essay to make it "normal."

Michael's and my problems in trying to emulate Kochman's course can be reduced to the same description: We are not him. We are not creating curricula for graduate courses, at least not yet; instead, we are graduate students teaching required first-year composition course and thus have limited autonomy in determining the ecumenical goals and local issues of the courses we teach. Unlike Kochman, we are not affiliated with Chicago's Institute for Inner City Studies; rather, we teach at the University of Arizona, a public institution renowned for its warm weather, influential Greek social system and "laid back" party atmosphere. Of the UA's 36,000 students, only 2% (about 750 students) are African-American [Hispanics 11%, Asians 4%, Native Americans 1 1/2%], <u>less than 20% total are minority students</u>. A large percentage of UA students, especially first year students, are from affluent, predominantly if not exclusively white

urban areas. Ironically, many are from the "outer city" areas of Chicago, as well as of New York and of southern and bay area California. Given these different contexts, then, it's probably little wonder that Michael and I had difficulties in trying to accomplish in our classroom what Kochman did in his.

But we were convinced, and still are, that our goal was a valuable one, so we did our best to work within the limitations set up by our professional status and by the nature of the student population at our institution. In many ways our efforts were disappointing. Though I feel certain that most of my students left my course better writers and some even developed or sustained an enjoyment of literature, I think few would be able to map out differences in black and white communicative styles or to explain how those differences result in communicative conflicts. Both Michael and I met with much resistance in trying to discuss stylistic characteristics and their relationship to race. We often abandoned the topic altogether in favor of discussing writing techniques and/or other interpretive issues related to the specific writing and reading assignments the students were required to complete. For the most part, we were not able to focus our course on the topic of style very often. Because of the nature of the reading lists, students often did discuss aspects of culture and of cultural interpretations and evaluations of behavior. However, what we wanted was to focus discussions on issues of <u>language</u> and culture; we wanted students to be able to analyze an author's writing style or the characters' use of language and reflect on the ways that language determines discursive power relations in fictional worlds as well as in our own. But, this sort of discussion or analysis rarely, if ever, happened.

Nonetheless, we <u>can</u> share some useful insights that resulted from our initial efforts to incorporate our notions of style into a composition classroom.

In particular, we can recommend approaches to a course that centers on communicative styles and on black and white styles in specific. Our recommendations are based on our reflection on specific problems we had, what we see as their causes, and the solutions we came up with.

RECOMMENDATION #1 -- USE GENRES ACCESSIBLE TO THE STUDENT POPULATION OF THE COURSE.

Michael and I agree that the UA's English 102--a required, one semester composition course that focuses on reading and writing about lit at an introductory level--is <u>not</u> a good site for an in-depth consideration of black and white stylistic conventions. For one thing, most students in such a course do not have the vocabulary or linguistic expertise to discuss style. My 102 students are on cognitive overload already just trying to figure out how to identify and differentiate the techniques of point of view, plot structure, characterization, setting. Though they often demonstrate intuitive understandings of style ("I like the way the author makes things seem like a Spike Lee movie--'in your face,'"), when pressed to list specific examples that demonstrate the stylistic conventions they are referring to, they are at a loss. Thus, discussion of stylistic conventions of a different genre altogether would probably be more be productive among first year students in a writing emphasis literature course. For instance, a contrastive examination of black and white styles in, say, advertisements or sports plays or dance techniques or jokes--as opposed to in literature--might be might more effective in calling to the surface and isolating features that first year students can readily identify as stylistic differences in black and white communicative events.

But Michael and I agree that a literature course is a good site for the kind of discussion about style, language, and discursive power relations that

Michael and I hoped for. But such discussion would more possible and more productive among people already knowledgeable about the techniques specific to the genre being discussed (for instance, students in an upper division writing, literature, or linguistics course). Furthermore, even though teaching the vocabulary and expertise necessary to identify and analyze stylistic conventions could, of course, be the primary focus of a course, we think the course must have little other agenda. In the best possible world, we would develop a contrastive rhetoric course which announces its primary purpose as comparing and contrasting the stylistic conventions of traditionally black and white discourse communities. We would also use Kochman's book itself as a text, a starting point that would facilitate students' understanding of how to isolate stylistic conventions. Kochman's somewhat over-generalized characterizations of who and what constitute black and white discourses could also give students a point from which to formulate their own notions of the continuum along which communicative styles are determined and evaluated.

RECOMMENDATION #2 -- ADAPT YOUR APPROACH ACCORDING TO THE ROLES YOU CAN PLAY AND THAT YOUR STUDENTS CAN ALSO ASSUME.

Those of you who teach multicultural curriculums and/or texts, and especially those of you who do so in the context of required introductory courses, are probably more than familiar with student resistance to discussion issues of race. Particularly for Michael and me, this opposition was stultifying. The resistance was amplified by the make up of the UA student population: neither one of us had a single black student in any of our sections (Michael has taught two sections of this course, and I have taught four--that's approximately 150 randomly selected students and not one African American student in the lot!) As a result, we heard few or no contradictions to Anglo students'

assumption about the value and intent of some of the pieces by black authors that we read. No African American voices were represented in the courses, none that is, other than Michael's if indeed "the African American speaking" were the position from which he consciously chose to speak, a choice which would of course determine the positions from which his students responded to him and to his course material. Thus, one result of the monologic student resistance to discussing issues of race that Michael and I both encountered during the course was our having to simultaneously play "devil's advocate" and/or stand for, speak for and about blacks and black culture. Though assuming such positions is sometimes necessary to spark debate, it is inevitably uncomfortable for both of us, potentially patronizing and cooptive for JaneE and authoritative and defensive for Michael.

In addition we encountered the inescapable discomfort associated with liberatory education, with pedagogy that problematizes the "norm" in an effort to bring to consciousness the codes and mores that determine the dominant culture's power relations. bell hooks claims that "In a consumer culture where we are all led to believe that the value of our voice is not determined by the extent to which it challenges, or makes critical reflection possible, but rather by whether or not it (and sometimes even we) is liked, it is difficult to keep a liberatory message."[1] Her statement is even more true for our students than for us, especially when most of them are teenaged products of the dominant culture. In my experience, students with viewpoints that their peers see as critical or challenging often repress those viewpoints in class discussion, especially if said students are shy, not particularly forceful in oral debates, or the solitary

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[1] Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black. Boston: South End Press, 1989. 16.

representative of a specific race, class, or ethnic group. Yet, the expression of these viewpoints is crucial to discussion. Though using students' privately expressed journal writing is a way to give voice to these critical or challenging points of view, such a practice does not foster student trust in the instructor and does not necessarily foster further discussion the classroom either.

RECOMMENDATION #3 -- WITH STUDENTS, DEVELOP VOCABULARY THAT DELINEATES DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF ISSUES OF RACE.

We notice that an important aspect of resistance to discussing issues related to race is the tendency to reduce discussions to some monolithic "bottom line," namely the 'racism is bad' thing. "I'm so tired of discussing the racism thing" is a complaint I've not only heard from students but read on their evaluations of my classes. All too often complex questions such as "What do you see as Toni Morrison's purpose in writing The Bluest Eye?" are reduced to simplistic answers like she wants us to see how oppressed black people are or how bad racism is. Additionally, students are likely to interpret questions about their feelings or viewpoints on topics of race as thinly disguised teacher-attempts to publicly demonstrate their inherent racism and so they avoid responding to such questions. Students often and effectively use reductionist responses as ways to resist further debate, particularly if and when they view debate itself and/or the topic being debated as uncomfortable.

For instance, just last week my classes were giving group presentations on some aspect of the context of The Bluest Eye. A young woman from the group asked the class at large "have any of you ever been the only white in an otherwise totally black group? how did you feel?" When someone said "I felt afraid," another white female's leapt in to say "Why were you afraid? I went to an all

white school with three black guys and one of them was my boyfriend. I am not a racist and I am not afraid. It's stupid to be afraid of black people." The student leading the group presentation had the wherewithal to point out "We're not talking about that; we're talking about how it feels to be surrounded only by people who are not like you, to be surrounded by images that don't represent you. Like in the book, you know." Other students were not so willing to respond to her further questions. Meanwhile, the girl who had had a black boyfriend spent the rest of the class muttering to the student beside her about how she wasn't a racist and she couldn't understand all these students' racist attitudes.

As a solution, I think that what I and my students need are specific and diverse strategies to discuss issues of race as well as vocabularies that will delineate different aspects of the issues. For instance, during that recent altercation in my classroom, I wish I would have had the wherewithal to slow down the conversation and highlight the different issues and cross purposes going on in the discussions. I wish I would have noted that the group's presentation centered on the issue of representation, an issue concerned with a minority culture's attempts to control the ways that it is represented in the dominant culture. I would have liked to point out that the question posed to the class centered on the issue of identity and self-image when one is viewed as "other" to the dominant culture; however, the girl's interruption focused on the issue of miscegenation, the mixture of races, as well as on the issue of xenophobia, a fear of hatred of anything that seems strange or foreign, fear of "the other." At this point, students could probably have been more aware of the difference between the fear of "the other" and the fear of being the other. Thus, they could have been able to see and discuss the fact that none of the issues at stake centered directly on racism, though of course fear of the strange or foreign is a

contributor to racist attitudes as are dominant culture's negative representations of the "other."

I am convinced that thinking through these complex issues, developing a vocabulary to articulate these different aspects of "that racism thing," and requiring our students to do the same are all essential habits that we must develop in order to successfully deflect student resistance to discussing issues of race that we encountered when we tried to focus classroom debate on the conflicts created by differences in black and white communicative styles.

RECOMMENDATION #4 -- REVERSE THE FORE- AND BACKGROUND OF DISCUSSIONS OF RACISM

In my sustained efforts to find alternative strategies for talking about race, in particular to shake up students' typical, politically correct answers like "The purpose of this novel [or story or essay] is to show how blacks are oppressed and white are oppressors," I included portions of Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark in my reading packet. Even though the book is dense and was difficult for most of my students to grasp, Morrison's focus on the effects of racism on the oppressor, rather than on the oppressed, produced different sort of thinking, writing, and talking about issues related to racism. One woman's journal writing in particular recounted an experiment she'd participated in during fifth grade:

> For one week the people with dark eyes were in power and the next week, the people with light eyes were. I was one of the dark eyes and at first I had a hard time with it. I didn't like being mean to my light-eyed friends. But soon I realized what a great thing it was to have this control. . . .I guess people who discriminate feel a sense of power and superiority. I think that it makes people angry and bitter most of their lives. They have to act like they have no feelings for others, but I have a hard time believing that this is true for most people. Probably once a person starts acting this way, their ego won't let them stop.

This sort of response is a far cry from the resistance and pat answers other

assignments yielded, a good beginning on the road to more complex and reflective discussions about race.

RECOMMENDATION #5 -- CAPITALIZE ON "COMMUNICATIVE TROUBLE" AS A MEANS OF EXPOSING IMPLICIT RULES GOVERNING APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION

The reader response unit of the English 102 curriculum worked quite well in eliciting candid and multifarious responses from students. In particular, a journal writing assignment that I gave students during their reading of John Updike's "A&P" and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Hammer Man" asked them first to read only the initial paragraph of the story and then write briefly about what they expected the remainder of the story to be about. Then, upon completion of the story, they were to write about how the story did or did not meet their expectations. A majority of students' responses to "The Hammer Man" reflected their confusion and frustration about not being able to get their bearings in the story. They made comments like "The plot's too choppy and unconnected" or "I keep expecting her to tell me what happened to that guy on the first page but she never does." They also were disgusted or at least offended by the narrator's "over active imagination" and "immature desire for attention." Yet, the same sort of vehement responses were not elicited by "A&P." Most students perceived Updike's style as "clear and natural and easy to follow just like conversation" despite the fact that that story also introduces characters never seen after page one, includes information that can be seen as tangential to the movement of the plot, and is told by an adolescent narrator who quits his job in order to be noticed by some girls.

I see this sort of contrast in reader responses to paired texts as a site of what sociolinguists call "communicative trouble." As such, it offers an

incredibly rich resource for exposing students' implicit rules governing their evaluation and interpretation of communicative style. Exposure of these unconsciously-held notions of what constitutes appropriate and effective communication is essential to understanding style; the revelation facilitates our discovering, in Kochman's words, "what [black and white] participants [were] seeing in each others' behavior that prompted them to react as they did."

RECOMMENDATION #6 -- CREATE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS THAT REQUIRE STUDENTS TO SITUATE THEMSELVES AND THEIR READING AND WRITING PROCESSES IN A CONTEXT

The reader response unit of our course also generated some very interesting essays that focused on the experience of communicative trouble, on the discovery of our implicit rules for evaluating communicative styles. On student in particular wrote about the evolution of his own evaluative and interpretive process that resulted from his first reading a text, then recording his response, listening to others' and finally re-reading and writing an essay about the same text. In that essay, the author used his own initial response as a way to examine his evaluations of the text before and after hearing possible explanations for what he initially saw as the "confusing" style and "superficial meaning" of the text. The explanations that he heard in class were based on other students and I relating what we knew about the real world context similar to that of the characters in the story--East Indians who had recently immigrated to Toronto and many of whom were mourning the sudden and tragic deaths of multiple family members. This student's self-conscious essay proved so effective in his being able to grasp complex ideas about the contextually-bound and thus culturally bound nature of "appropriate style" that--the next time I teach black and white styles in conflict--I plan to assign an essay like the one he self-

generated, namely an essay that centers on students' own reading, writing, interpretive and evaluative processes.

These recommendations are the fruits of Michael's and my initial efforts to incorporate a contrastive study of black and white styles and our revised notion of style into our compositions classroom. Measuring what the students might see as important aspects of the course is a bit difficult. One way I have tried to do so is to offer them a forum to share their perspectives: during the last week of the semester I ask them to complete an anonymous questionnaire that solicits their opinions of the course, of the reading and writing assignments I chose, of the progress they made in their writing, and finally of what they think constitutes "good writing." I was disappointed in the number of responses (here as well as on students' formal course evaluations for the department) that complained "I wish we would have read more diverse stuff. I felt like all I did was read black people." or the familiar "Why does every English class I take have to be about racism?" However, I was heartened by the overwhelming majority of students who said that they thought they did improve their writing skills. One student in particular [I recognized the teeny tiny hand-printing as that of the writer of the self-conscious paper I discussed above] not only claimed to make progress in his writing but also seemed to have grasped an important aspect of style: "I have been able [he says] to express me more in my writing rather than just ideas. I have become more open minded and have thought a lot more on my own." [Interestingly too, and similar to what I have suggested as a need to find ways to encourage students to present viewpoints that challenge or critique dominant opinions, this student's response to the question "what would you change about the course if you were the instructor" was "I would've maybe put people on

the spot to express their idea a little more. I think when you pull the comfort zone out from underneath people they are forced to fly. It certainly helped with me."]

In fact, and despite the disappointments Michael and I experienced and that I've enumerated to you today, based on my students' responses to the questions "what do you think constitutes good writing," it would appear that at least in part our course helped make students aware of what we want them to become aware of: namely the contextually bound nature of "appropriate style" and of communicative effectiveness. When describing their notions of good writing, at least 1/3 to 1/2 of my students mentioned the variability involved in evaluating writing, making comments like, "every one has a different definition of this" or "good writing is understandable (although it doesn't have to be easy to understand) and interesting to its intended audience" or even "good writing is when someone is able to take a view of the world they wish to share and create the opportunity for others to be able to see through that window and create other windows of their own."

In the upcoming semester, Spring '94, we will be again teaching a course that foregrounds black and white communicative styles, this time within the context of a sophomore composition course. We hope to have classes more racially mixed; students more willing to voice unpopular, challenging, critical viewpoints (students more like Tahirah Akbar, for instance). We know that the agenda of this particular course will allow us to devote more time and attention to communicative styles, and we will be able to use Kochman's book as a text for the course. We will let you know how it goes. In the meantime, we look forward to your suggestions today and we remain dedicated to our belief that it is essential to teach students at all levels that style is a function of context, that is of

the relationships between writer, audience, and subject. As such, the evaluation and appropriateness of any particular style is not "universal" or "obvious" or "natural" but rather culturally bound.

Attachment #1

Michael Robinson's and my notions of style and our ideas for our course were based in large part on Thomas Kochman's Black and White Styles in Conflict. We were impressed with Kochman's effort "to look at black and white interactions in an attempt to discover what participants were seeing in each other's behavior that prompted them to react as they did," with his taxonomy of the categories of stylistic conventions (for instance fighting words, boasting and bragging, information as property, male and female interactions), and with his detailed explanations and examples of the general characteristics of black and white conventions and of the kinds of conflicts that typically resulted between black and whites during communicative events.

Our goal was to use a composition course as a site for heightening students and teachers' awareness of 1) the stylistic differences that create and perpetuate black and white communicative conflicts and 2) the implicit rules that govern the ways that communicative styles are evaluated. We make the assumption that such awareness will result in students and teachers reformulating their definitions and value judgments of communicative styles.

Our primary constraint was that we needed to incorporate our agenda into the mission of English 102, a writing emphasis introductory literature course, the second semester of the two semester composition sequence required of all UA students. The general goal of this course is to further develop students' writing, reading, and research skills. Specifically, the course asks student to read and analyze literary works using at least three different interpretive frames: reader response, rhetorical (critical or formal) analysis, and contextual analysis. Instructors of English 102 choose one from a pool of three different literary anthologies to use as the text for the course. In addition, they choose a critical edition of a novel or created their own "critical edition" by gathering critical articles about and reviews of the novel, interviews with the author of the novel, and other relevant contextual articles.

Michael and I decided to focus on fiction only and to use the reading assignments themselves and classroom discussion of the assignments as the basis for our introducing the notion of style as integral to content and as a function of the relationship between writer, audience, and subject. We opted to supplement our anthologies with a reading packet so that whenever possible we could pair reading assignments in order to present a white style and a black style on each topic. For instance, we paired Updike's "A&P" with Toni Cade Bambara's "The Hammer Man," both adolescent initiation stories; we coupled Peter Taylor's "The Old Forest" with Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, both short novels set during pre-WWII America and concerned with delineating the specific contexts that confine, license, and justify the actions of the novels' respective characters despite the obvious fact that the context that each novella presents is a world apart from the other's. We also included brief selections by Eastern Indian and Native American writers, namely Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief," Silko's "Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand" and Erdrich's "The Red Convertible." Because it based on fiction representing diverse communicative styles, we hoped our course would call to the surface the ways that language reflects and shapes world view and that style is inextricable from that making.